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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2846
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5136
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 9157
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5243
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 2915
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000030

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: POLIFESSORS: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CONFLICT SUBVERTED
DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Classified By: POL Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On January 6, poloffs met with prominent political science professors Kim Hyung-joon of Myongji University and Hahm Sung-deuk of Korea University to discuss the current political situation and implications of the recent clashes in the National Assembly. Kim said that the National Assembly Speaker's original decision -- announced on December 30 -- to send 85 pending bills directly to the plenary for a vote obviated debate over the laws in committee thereby subverting the democratic process. Hahm said that President Lee Myung-bak, who was behind the push to get many of these bills passed, did not understand the importance of working with the legislature. On the early posturing for the next presidential campaign, both men were skeptical that Park Geun-hye would be the next Korean president because the polling was inconclusive and the early favorite never triumphed in Korean elections. Referencing the old American adage about all politics being local, Hahm said that in Korea, all politics was personal. It was impossible, both men agreed, to understand political appointments without understanding personal connections. END SUMMARY.

Conflict in National Assembly

12. (C) Kim Hyung-joon said the recent confrontation between the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) and the opposition Democratic Party (DP) was a failure of the democratic process. Kim placed much of the blame on National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-o for threatening to send 85 bills directly to the plenary, skipping the debate of the legislation in committees. Both Kim and Hahm Sung-deuk pointed out that the 85 bills were based on the legislation that Lee's transition team, of which Kim Hyung-o was deputy director, had proposed. Kim Hyung-o is now being forced to publicly back track on the very laws that he had proposed. Kim Hyung-joon also criticized Park Geun-hye's January 5 statement in which she faulted the GNP for the fighting in the National Assembly and panned the bills the administration had proposed. Park did the same thing in 2005, Kim said, when, as GNP Chair, her party occupied all committee rooms to block controversial legislation proposed by then President Roh. While he agreed with Park's assessment that the laws had not been screened by the public and that compromise was necessary, he noted that she should have weighed in earlier if she had wanted to alleviate the conflict. To avoid such clashes in the future, Hahm said a winner-takes-all committee system should be put

in place like in the U.S. where the majority party controls all the committee chairmanships. Currently, the chairmanships are divvied up among parties through long negotiations.

13. (C) Hahm said that Lee Myung-bak had a poor understanding of how to handle the National Assembly and speculated that only at the end of his term would Lee understand the importance of the legislature. Kim agreed and said that Lee Myung-bak should have talked to Roh Moo-hyun about the KORUS FTA and either gotten Roh's public support or at least his silence. (NOTE: Former President Roh Moo-hyun, a progressive, concluded the KORUS FTA negotiations during his term.) Lee Myung-bak had made a great mistake in the spring of 2008 when he had listened to Korean Ambassador to the U.S. Lee Tae-shik's and then-National Security Advisor Kim Byung-kook's assurances that the FTA would pass in the U.S. Congress if Korea lifted its ban on U.S. beef imports. They both agreed that Lee finally understood that it was unlikely the FTA would pass soon in the U.S. and Lee understood this finally.

14. (C) Kim said he thought the DP had come out on top in the recent fighting in the National Assembly. Kim noted that he had lunch on January 5 with DP Chief Chung Sye-kyun. Kim cautioned Chung that the DP's success was only temporary since the DP had not done anything but oppose an unpopular president. Eventually the DP would have to articulate an alternative to the GNP's policy. Kim, a polling expert, said that if Lee's popularity rating was above 40 percent, he could risk pushing through legislation, but since it was stuck at 25 percent, he and the GNP ultimately had to back down.

Next President

15. (C) Expressing skepticism about Park Geun-hye's chances of winning the 2012 presidential election, Kim referenced recent polls he conducted in which 80 percent of respondents said they did not know who the next president would be and only 10 percent said it would be Park. Poloff asked Kim why his numbers differed from a recent Korean newspaper (Chosun Ilbo) poll in which a plurality of 36 percent of respondents favored Park Geun-hye as the next president. Kim explained that the newspaper poll had asked people to choose the best candidate among a set of candidates whereas Kim's question asked for a prediction of the outcome. Kim said his poll upheld the conventional wisdom about Park's support demographic; her strongest supporters tended to be older, from Youngnam, and conservative. Kim said that he anticipated the 2012 presidential election would essentially be a battle in the GNP primary between Park and Chung Mong-joon. Although Chung did not currently have much support within the party, Kim predicted that the anti-Park groups within the GNP would coalesce and throw their support behind Chung.

Politics is Personal

16. (C) Kim and Hahm said that the most important thing to consider in Korean politics is that all politics is personal. As evidence, they pointed to Lee Myung-bak's political appointments. All his appointees were older because Lee Myung-bak and his elder brother, National Assembly member Lee Sang-deuk, favored their contemporaries with whom the Lees had close relations. While this certainly led to less dynamism in aides' thinking, the real problem Lee Myung-bak had was that he did not listen to his aides' advice. On the ruling party side, the septuagenarian Chair Park Hee-tae was too old to deal with the current situation as he was only preparing for retirement.

17. (C) Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan got the Foreign

Minister slot, they claimed, because he took care of Lee Myung-bak during Lee's stint in Washington, DC. (NOTE: Lee Myung-bak spent one year as a fellow at George Washington University in 1998-9 after he was removed from the National Assembly due to a campaign finance violation.) On the other hand, one of Lee's main foreign policy advisors during the campaign, Korea University Professor Hyun In-taek, had thus far failed to obtain any position. Kim and Hahm said most speculate this was because Hyun failed to ingratiate himself with Lee confidants Lee Sang-deuk and Lee Jae-o. Another example of Hyun's loss in influence is that a more junior Lee campaign aide and Korea University professor Kim Sung-han was chosen to accompany Deputy National Security Adviser Kim Tae-hyo and Han Seung-joo to the U.S. to meet the Obama team.

¶8. (C) As another example, Hahm said that former President Roh Moo-hyun appointed Lee Tae-shik as Korean Ambassador to the U.S. because Lee's son was the first member of RohSaMo (a support group of fervent Roh supporters). Lee's key to survival was that he had first ingratiated himself with Chung Mong-joon and then with Lee Jae-o and had thus lasted longer in DC than most expected he would. Lee Tae-shik also claimed to be from the same "Kyungju Lee" clan as the President. Hahm speculated that Han Seung-joo, who also has close ties to Chung Mong-joon, is the most likely candidate to replace Lee Tae-shik. They noted that while personal politics had its faults, the upside was that compromise was sometimes possible if personal relations were good across partisan boundaries.

Constitutional Reform

¶9. (C) Hahm currently serves on the National Assembly Speaker's special commission to investigate constitutional revision. The commission, comprised almost entirely of law professors, planned to issue its report in February after an open hearing January 20-21. Hahm said the group was most impressed with Portugal's system. Lisbon recently ratified a new constitution that limited the president's powers -- he could veto bills and dissolve the legislature but otherwise had little power -- and allowed the prime minister, who was chosen by the legislature, to run the country. The group also liked the German system in which the provincial governors constituted the Senate.

¶10. (C) Kim, who is on a separate Speaker's special commission to investigate National Assembly reform (that report should be out in the next two weeks), said, regardless of the constitutional reform commission's findings, neither system was likely to be implemented. According to Kim's polling, the vast majority of Koreans supported constitutional revision but that their first choice was a presidential system with two four-year terms. The second most popular system was one in which the president served two five-year terms. The Korean people, Kim said, want to pick their president.

Comment

¶11. (C) Kim and Hahm are both insightful, connected "polifessors" who actively court political figures and reporters, perhaps in hopes of entering politics themselves. While both are aghast at the antics in the Assembly in the past several weeks, they were dubious that proposals from either of their commissions would be implemented. Both conservative, the professors' pessimistic assessment of Lee Myung-bak is echoed by political thinkers on both sides of the aisle. While the spectacle in the Assembly avoided the climactic physical confrontation many expected, it does not augur well for Lee Myung-bak. As his one year mark in office rapidly approaches, he has yet to pass any significant legislation, has no signature achievement to point to and his relationship with the National Assembly shows no signs of

improving.
STEPHENS